

## A RASH EXPERIMENT

THE hands on the wharf had been working all Saturday night and well into the Sunday morning to finish the *Foam*, and now, at ten o'clock, with hatches down and freshly scrubbed decks, the skipper and mate stood watching the tide as it rose slowly over the smooth Thames mud.

"What time's she coming?" inquired the skipper, turning a lazy eye up at the wharf.

"About ha'-past ten she said," replied the mate. "It's very good o' you to turn out and let her have your state-room."

"Don't say another word about that," said the skipper, impressively. "I've met your wife once or twice, George, an' I must say that a nicer spoken woman, an' a more well-be'aved one, I've seldom seen."

"Same to you," said the mate; "your wife I mean."

"Any man," continued the skipper, "as would lay in a comfortable state-room, George, and leave a lady a-trying to turn and to dress and on-dress herself in a poky little locker ought to be ashamed of himself."

"You see, it's the luggage they bring," said the mate, slowly refilling his pipe. "What they

want with it all I can't think. As soon as my old woman makes up her mind to come for a trip, to-morrow being Bank Holiday, an' she being in the mind for a outing, what does she do? Goes down Commercial Road and buys a bonnet far beyond her station."

"They're all like it," said the skipper; "mine's just as bad. What does that boy want?"

The boy approached the edge of the jetty, and, peering down at them, answered for himself.

"Who's Captain Bunnett?" he demanded, shrilly.

"That's me, my lad," said the skipper, looking up.

"I've got a letter for yer," said the boy, holding it out.

The skipper held out his hands and caught it; and, after reading the contents, felt his beard and looked at the mate.

"It never rains but it pours," he said, figuratively.

"What's up?" inquired the other.

"'Ere's my old woman coming now," said the skipper. "Sent a note to say she's getting ready as fast as she can, an' I'm not to sail on any account till she comes."

"That's awkward," said the mate, who felt that he was expected to say something.

"It never struck me to tell her your wife was coming," said the skipper. "Where we're to put 'em both I don't know. I s'pose it's quite certain your wife'll come?"

"Certain," said the mate.

"No chance of 'er changing 'er mind?" suggested the skipper, looking away from him.

"Not now she's got that bonnet," replied the mate. "I s'pose there's no chance of your wife changing hers?"

The skipper shook his head. "There's one thing," he said, hopefully, "they'll be nice company for each other. They'll have to 'ave the state-room between 'em. It's a good job my wife ain't as big as yours."

"We'll be able to play four-'anded whist sometimes," said the mate, as he followed the skipper below to see what further room could be made.

"Crowded, but jolly," said the other.

The two cabs drove up almost at the same moment while they were below, and Mrs Bunnett's cabman had no sooner staggered on to the jetty with her luggage than Mrs Fillson's arrived with hers. The two ladies, who were entire strangers, stood regarding each other curiously as they looked down at the bare deck of the *Foam*.

"George!" cried Mrs Fillson, who was a fine woman, raising her voice almost to a scream in the effort to make herself heard above the winch of a neighbouring steamer.

It was unfortunate perhaps that both officers of the schooner bore the same highly respectable Christian name.

"George!" cried Mrs Bunnett, glancing indignantly at the other lady.

"*Ge-orge !*" cried Mrs Fillson, returning her looks with interest.

"Hussy," said Mrs Bunnett under her breath, but not very much under.

"GEORGE !"

There was no response.

"*George !*" cried both ladies together.

Still no response, and they made a louder effort.

There was yet another George on board, in the fore-castle, and, in response to pushes from curious friends below, he came up and regarded the fair duettists open-mouthed.

"What d'yer want?" he said at length, sheepishly.

"Will you tell Captain Bunnett that his wife, Mrs Bunnett, is here?" said that lady, a thin little woman with bright black eyes.

"Yes, mum," said the seaman, and was hurrying off when Mrs Fillson called him back.

"Will you tell Mr Fillson that his wife, Mrs Fillson, is up here?" she said, politely.

"All right, mum," said the other, and went below to communicate the pleasing tidings. Both husbands came up on deck hastily, and a glance served to show them how their wives stood.

"How do you do, Cap'n Bunnett?" said Mrs Fillson, with a fascinating smile.

"Good-morning, marm," said the skipper, trying to avoid his wife's eye; "that's my wife, Mrs Bunnett."

"Good-morning, ma'am," said Mrs Fillson, adjusting the new bonnet with the tips of her fingers.

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“Good-morning to you,” said Mrs Bunnett, in a cold voice, and patronizing. “You have come to bring your husband some of his things, I suppose?”

“She’s coming with us,” said the skipper, in a hurry to have it over. “Wait half a moment, and I’ll help you down.”

He got up on to the side and helped them both to the deck, and, with a great attempt at cheery conversation, led the way below, where, in the midst of an impressive silence, he explained that the ladies would have to share the state-room between them.

“That’s the only way out of it,” said the mate, after waiting in vain for them to say something.

“It’s a fairish size, when you come to look at it,” said the skipper, putting his head on one side to see whether the bunk looked larger that way.

“Pack three in there at a pinch,” said the mate, hardily.

Still the ladies said nothing, but there was a storm-signal hoisted in Mrs Bunnett’s cheek, which boded no good to her husband. There was room for one trunk only in the state-room, and by prompt generalship Mrs Fillson got hers in first. Having seen it safe she went up on deck for a look round.

“George,” said Mrs Bunnett, fiercely, as soon as they were alone.

“Yes, my dear,” said her husband.

“Pack that woman off home,” said Mrs Bunnett, sharply.

"I couldn't do that," said the skipper, firmly. "It's your own fault ; you should have said you was coming."

"Oh, I know you didn't want me to come," said Mrs Bunnett, the roses on her bonnet trembling. "The mate can think of a little pleasure for *his* wife, but I can stay at home and do your mending and keep the house clean. Oh, I know ; don't tell me."

"Well, it's too late to alter it," said her husband. "I must get up above now ; you'd better come, too."

Mrs Bunnett followed him on deck, and, getting as far from the mate's wife as possible, watched with a superior air of part ownership the movements of the seamen as they got under way. A favourable westerly breeze was blowing, and the canvas once set she stood by her husband as he pointed out the various objects of interest on the banks of the river.

They were still in the thick of the traffic at dinner-time, so that the skipper was able, to his secret relief, to send the mate below to do the honours of the table. He came up from it pale and scared, and, catching the skipper's eye, hunched his shoulders significantly.

"No words ?" inquired the latter, anxiously, in a half-whisper.

"Not exactly words," replied the mate. "What you might call snacks."

"I know," said the other with a groan.

"If you don't now," said the mate, "you will

at tea-time. I'm not going to sit down there with them alone again. You needn't think it. If you was to ask me what I've been eating I couldn't tell you."

He moved off a bit as his table companions came up on deck, and the master of the *Foam*, deciding to take the bull by the horns, called both of them to him, and pointed out the beauties of the various passing craft. In the midst of his discourse his wife moved off, leaving the unhappy man conversing alone with Mrs Fillson, her face containing an expression such as is seen in the prints of the very best of martyrs, as she watched them.

At tea-time the men sat in misery ; Mrs Bunnett passed Mrs Fillson her tea without looking at her, an example which Mrs Fillson followed in handing her the cut bread and butter. When she took the plate back it was empty, and Mrs Bunnett, convulsed with rage, was picking the slices out of her lap.

" Oh, I *am* sorry," said Mrs Fillson.

" You're not, ma'am," said Mrs Bunnett, fiercely. " You did it on purpose."

" There, there ! " said both men, feebly.

" Of course my husband'll sit quite calm and see me insulted," said Mrs Bunnett, rising angrily from her seat.

" And my husband'll sit still drinking tea while I'm given the lie," said Mrs Fillson, bending an indignant look upon the mate.

" If you think I'm going to share the state-

room with that woman, George, you're mistaken," said Mrs Bunnett, in a terrible voice. "I'd sooner sleep on a doorstep."

"And I'd sooner sleep on the scraper," said Mrs Fillson, regarding her foe's scanty proportions.

"Very well, me an' the mate'll sleep there," said the skipper, wearily. "You can have the mate's bunk and Mrs Fillson can have the locker. You don't mind, George?"

"Oh, George don't mind," said Mrs Bunnett, mimickingly; "anything'll do for George. If you'd got the spirit of a man, you wouldn't let me be insulted like this."

"And if you'd got the spirit of a man," said Mrs Fillson, turning on her husband, "you wouldn't let them talk to me like this. You never stick up for me."

She flounced up on deck, where Mrs Bunnett, after a vain attempt to finish her tea, shortly followed her. The two men continued their meal for some time in silence.

"We'll have to 'ave a quarrel just to oblige them, George," said the skipper at length as he put down his cup. "Nothing else'll satisfy 'em."

"It couldn't be done," said the mate, reaching over and clapping him on the back.

"Just pretend, I mean," said the other.

"It couldn't be done proper," said the mate; "they'd see through it. We've sailed together five years now, an' never 'ad what I could call a really nasty word."



"Well, if you can think o' anything," said the skipper, "say so. This sort o' thing is worrying."

"See how we get on at breakfast," said the mate, as he lit his pipe. "If that's as bad as this, we'll have a bit of a row to please 'em."

Breakfast next morning was, if anything, worse, each lady directly inciting her lord to acts of open hostility. In this they were unsuccessful, but in the course of the morning the husbands arranged matters to their own satisfaction, and at the next meal the storm broke with violence.

"I don't wish to complain or hurt anybody's feelings," said the skipper, after a side-wink at the mate, "but if you could eat your wittles with a little less noise, George, I'd take it as a favour."

"Would you?" said the mate, as his wife stiffened suddenly in her seat. "Oh!"

Both belligerents, eyeing each other ferociously, tried hard to think of further insults.

"Like a pig," continued the skipper, grumblingly.

The mate hesitated so long for a crushing rejoinder that his wife lost all patience, and rose to her feet crimson with wrath.

"How dare you talk to my husband like that?" she demanded, fiercely. "George, come up on deck this instant!"

"I don't mind what he says," said the mate, who had only just begun his dinner.

"You come away at once," said his wife, pushing his plate from him.

The mate got up with a sigh, and, meeting the

look of horror-stricken commiseration in his captain's eye, returned it with one of impotent rage.

"Use a larger knife, cap'n," he said, savagely. "You'll swallow that little 'un one of these days."

The skipper, with the weapon in question gripped in his fist, turned round and stared at him in petrified amazement.

"If I wasn't the cap'n o' this ship, George," he said, huskily, "an' bound to set a good example to the men, I'd whop you for them words."

"It's all for your good, Captain Bunnnett," said Mrs Fillson, mincingly. "There was a poor old workhouse man I used to give a penny to sometimes, who would eat with his knife, and he choked himself with it."

"Ay, he did that, and he hadn't got a mouth half the size o' yours," said the mate, warningly.

"Cap'n or no cap'n, crew or no crew," said the skipper, in a suffocating voice, "I can't stand this. Come up on deck, George, and repeat them words."

Before the mate could accept the invitation, he was dragged back by his wife, while at the same time Mrs Bunnnett, with a frantic scream, threw her arms round her husband's neck, and dared him to move.

"You wait till I get you ashore, my lad," said the skipper, threateningly.

"I'll have to bring the ship home after I've done with you," retorted the mate, as he passed up on deck with his wife.

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During the afternoon the couples exchanged not a word, though the two husbands exchanged glances of fiery import, and later on, their spouses being below, gradually drew near to each other. The mate, however, had been thinking, and as they came together met his foe with a pleasant smile.

"Bravo, old man!" he said, heartily.

"What d'yer mean?" demanded the skipper, in gruff astonishment.

"I mean the way you pretended to row me," said the mate. "Splendid you did it. I tried to back you up, but lor! I wasn't in it with you."

"What, d'yer mean to say you didn't mean what you said?" inquired the other.

"Why, o' course," said the mate, with an appearance of great surprise. "You didn't, did you?"

"No," said the skipper, swallowing something in his throat. "No, o' course not. But you did it well, too, George. Uncommon well, you did."

"Not half so well as you did," said the mate. "Well, I s'pose we've got to keep it up now."

"I s'pose so," said the skipper; "but we mustn't keep it up on the same things, George. Swallerin' knives an' that sort o' thing, I mean."

"No, no," said the mate, hastily.

"An' if you could get your missus to go home by train from Summercove, George, we might have a little peace and quietness," added the other.

"She'd never forgive me if I asked her," said the mate; "you'll have to order it, cap'n."

"I won't do that, George," said the skipper, firmly. "I'd never treat a lady like that aboard my ship. I 'ope I know 'ow to behave myself if I do eat with my knife."

"Stow that!" said the mate, reddening. "We'll wait and see what turns up," he added, hopefully.

For the next three days nothing fresh transpired, and the bickering between the couples, assumed on the part of the men and virulent on the part of their wives, went from bad to worse. It was evident that the ladies preferred it to any other amusement life on ship-board could offer, and, after a combined burst of hysterics on their part, in which the whole ship's company took a strong interest, the husbands met to discuss heroic remedies.

"It's getting worse and worse," said the skipper, ruefully. "We'll be the laughing-stock o' the crew even afore they're done with us. There's another day afore we reach Summercove, there's five or six days there, an' at least five back again."

"There'll be murder afore then," said the mate, shaking his head.

"If we could only pack 'em *both* 'ome by train," continued the skipper.

"That's an expense," said the mate.

"It 'ud be worth it," said the other.

"An' they wouldn't do it," said the mate, "neither of 'em."

"I've seen women having rows afore," said

the skipper, "but then they could get away from each other. It's being boxed up in this little craft as does the mischief."

"S'pose we pretend the ship's not seaworthy?" said the mate.

"Then they'd stand by us," said the skipper, "closer than ever."

"I b'leeve they would," said the mate. "They'd go fast enough if we'd got a case of smallpox or anything like that aboard, though."

The skipper grunted assent.

"It 'ud be worth trying," said the mate. "We've pretended to have a quarrel. Now just as we're going into port let one of the hands, the boy if you like, pretend he's sickening for smallpox."

"How's he going to do it?" inquired the skipper, derisively.

"You leave it to me," replied the other. "I've got an idea how it's to be done."

Against his better judgment the skipper, after some demur, consented, and the following day, when the passengers were on deck gazing at the small port of Summercove as they slowly approached it, the cook came up excitedly and made a communication to the skipper.

"What?" cried the latter. "Nonsense!"

"What's the matter?" demanded Mrs Bunnett, turning round.

"Cook, here, has got it into his head that the boy's got the smallpox," said the skipper.

Both women gave a faint scream.

"Nonsense!" said Mrs Bunnett, with a pale face.

"Rubbish!" said Mrs Fillson, clasping her hands nervously.

"Very good, mum," said the cook, calmly. "You know best, o' course, but I was on a barque once what got it aboard bad, and I think I *ought* to know it when I see it."

"Yes; and now you think everything's the smallpox," said Mrs Bunnett, uneasily.

"Very well, mum," said the cook, spreading out his hands. "Will you come down an' 'ave a *look* at 'im?"

"No," snapped Mrs Bunnett, retreating a pace or two.

"Will you come down an' 'ave a look at 'im, sir?" inquired the cook.

"You stay where you are, George," said Mrs Bunnett, shrilly, as her husband moved forward. "Go farther off, cook."

"And keep your tongue still when we get to port," said the mate. "Don't go blabbing it all over the place, mind, or we shan't get nobody to work us out."

"Ay, ay," said the cook, moving off. "I ain't afraid of it—I've given it to people, but I've never took it myself yet."

"I'm sure I wish I was off this dreadful ship," said Mrs Fillson, nervously. "Nothing but unpleasantness. How long before we get to Summercove, Cap'n Bunnett?"

"'Bout a hour an' a 'arf ought to do it," said the skipper.

Both ladies sighed anxiously, and, going as far aft as possible, gazed eagerly at the harbour as it opened out slowly before them.

"I shall go back by train," said Mrs Bunnett. "It's a shame, having my holiday spoilt like this."

"It's one o' them things what can't be helped," said her husband, piously.

"You'd better give me a little money," continued his wife. "I shall get lodgings in the town for a day or two, till I see how things are going."

"It 'ud be better for you to get straight back home," said the skipper.

"Nonsense!" said his wife, sharply. "Suppose you take it yourself, I should have to be here to see you were looked after. I'm sure Mrs Fillson isn't going home."

Mrs Fillson, holding out her hand to Mr Fillson, said she was sure she wasn't.

"It 'ud be a load off our minds if you did go," said the mate, speaking for both.

"Well, we're not going for a day or two, at any rate," said Mrs Bunnett, glancing almost amiably at Mrs Fillson.

In face of this declaration, and in view of the persistent demands of the ladies, both men, with a very ill grace, furnished them with some money.

"Don't say a word about it ashore, mind," said the mate, avoiding his chief's indignant gaze.

"But you must have a doctor," said Mrs Bunnett.



"I know of a doctor here," said the mate; "that's all arranged for."

He moved away for a little private talk with the skipper, but that gentleman was not in a conversational mood, and a sombre silence fell upon all until they were snugly berthed at Summer-cove, and the ladies, preceded by their luggage on a trolley, went off to look for lodgings. They sent down an hour later to say that they had found them, and that they were very clean and comfortable, but a little more than they had intended to give. They implored their husbands not to run any unnecessary risks, and sent some disinfectant soap for them to wash with.

For three days they kept their lodgings and became fast friends, going, despite their anxiety, for various trips in the neighbourhood. Twice a day at least they sent down beef-tea and other delicacies for the invalid, which never got farther than the cabin, communication being kept up by a small boy who had strict injunctions not to go aboard. On the fourth day in the early morning they came down as close to the ship as they dared to bid farewell.

"Write if there's any change for the worse," cried Mrs Bunnett.

"Or if you get it, George," cried Mrs Fillson, anxiously.

"It's all right, he's going on beautiful," said the mate.

The two wives appeared to be satisfied, and with a final adieu went off to the railway station,



turning at every few yards to wave farewells until they were out of sight.

"If ever I have another woman aboard my ship, George," said the skipper, "I'll run into something. Who's the old gentleman?"

He nodded in the direction of an elderly man with white side-whiskers, who, with a black bag in his hand, was making straight for the schooner.

"Captain Bunnett?" he inquired, sharply.

"That's me, sir," said the skipper.

"Your wife sent me," said the tall man, briskly. "My name's Thompson—Dr Thompson. She says you've got a case of smallpox on board which she wants me to see."

"We've got a doctor," said the skipper and mate together.

"So your wife said, but she wished me particularly to see the case," said Dr Thompson. "It's also my duty as the medical officer of the port."

"You've done it, George, you've done it," moaned the panic-stricken skipper, reproachfully.

"Well, anybody can make a mistake," whispered the mate back; "an' he can't touch us, as it *ain't* smallpox. Let him come, and we'll lay it on to the cook. Say he made a mistake."

"That's the ticket," said the skipper, and turned to assist the doctor to the deck as the mate hurried below to persuade the indignant boy to strip and go to bed.

In the midst of a breathless silence the doctor examined the patient; then, to the surprise of all,

he turned to the crew and examined them one after the other.

"How long has this boy been ill?" he demanded.

"About four days," said the puzzled skipper.

"You see what comes of trying to hush this kind of thing up," said the doctor, sternly. "You keep the patient down here instead of having him taken away and the ship disinfected, and now all these other poor fellows have got it."

"*What?*" screamed the skipper, as the crew broke into profane expressions of astonishment and self-pity. "Got what?"

"Why, the smallpox," said the doctor. "Got it in its worst form, too. Suppressed. There's not one of them got a mark on him. It's all inside."

"Well, I'm damned!" said the skipper, as the crew groaned despairingly.

"What else did you expect?" inquired the doctor, wrathfully. "Well, they can't be moved now; they must all go to bed, and you and the mate must nurse them."

"And s'pose we catch it?" said the mate, feelingly.

"You must take your chance," said the doctor; then he relented a little. "I'll try to send a couple of nurses down this afternoon," he added. "In the meantime you must do what you can for them."

"Very good, sir," said the skipper, brokenly.

"All you can do at present," said the doctor,

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as he slowly mounted the steps, "is to sponge them all over with cold water. Do it every half-hour till the rash comes out."

"Very good," said the skipper again. "But you'll hurry up with the nurses, sir?"

He stood in a state of bewilderment until the doctor was out of sight, and then, with a heavy sigh, took his coat off, and set to work.

He and the mate, after warning off the men who had come down to work, spent all the morning in sponging their crew, waiting with an impatience born of fatigue for the rash to come out. This impatience was shared by the crew, the state of mind of the cook after the fifth sponging calling for severe rebuke on the part of the skipper.

"I wish the nurses 'ud come, George," he said, as they sat on the deck panting after their exertions; "this is a pretty mess if you like."

"Seems like a judgment," said the mate, wearily.

"Halloa, there!" came a voice from the quay.

Both men turned and looked up at the speaker.

"Halloa!" said the skipper, dully.

"What's all this about smallpox?" demanded the new-comer, abruptly.

The skipper waved his hand languidly towards the fore-castle.

"Five of 'em down with it," he said, quietly.

"Are you another doctor, sir?"

Without troubling to reply, their visitor jumped on board, and went nimbly below, followed by the other two.

"Stand out of the light," he said, brusquely. "Now, my lads, let's have a look at you."

He examined them in a state of bewilderment, grunting strangely as the washed-out men submitted to his scrutiny.

"They've had the best of cold-sponging," said the skipper, not without a little pride.

"Best of what?" demanded the other.

The skipper told him, drawing back indignantly as the doctor suddenly sat down and burst into a hoarse roar of laughter. The unfeeling noise grated harshly on the sensitive ears of the sick men, and Joe Burrows, raising himself in his bunk, made a feeble attempt to hit him.

"You've been sold," said the doctor, wiping his eyes.

"I don't take your meaning," said the skipper, with dignity.

"Somebody's been having a joke with you," said the doctor. "Get up, you fools; you've got about as much smallpox as I have."

"Do you mean to tell me——" began the skipper.

"Somebody's been having a joke with you, I tell you," repeated the doctor, as the men, with sundry oaths, half of relief, half of dudgeon, got out of bed and began groping for their clothes. "Who is it, do you think?"

The skipper shook his head, and the mate, following his lead, in duty bound, shook his; but a little while after, as they sat by the wheel smoking and waiting for the men to return to

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work the cargo out, they were more confidential. The skipper removed his pipe from his mouth, and, having eyed the mate for some time in silence, jerked his thumb in the direction of the railway station. The mate, with a woebegone nod, assented.

*From "Sea Urchins"*